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SUBJECT: LESOTHO: TAXI ASSOCIATION CALLS FOR FOUR-DAY STRIKE

REF: MASERU 163 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. SUMMARY: At a press conference on June 24, leaders of the Maseru Region Transport Association, accusing the GOL of bad faith negotiations, announced plans for a nationwide taxi strike from June 30 through July 3. One spokesperson advised residents of Maseru to stay at home for the duration of the strike "for the sake of peace and their safety." Various political and commercial figures, including the leader of the opposition Lesotho Workers Party and the Chairperson of the Maseru Chamber of Commerce and Industry, expressed support for the strike. The tenor of the press conference was shrill, and the Maseru Region Transport Association appears committed to its plan to strike. The GOL, however, has yet to react to the strike announcement. END SUMMARY.

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Strike Plan Announced  
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¶2. At a press conference on June 24 at the Lesotho Sun Hotel, the Maseru Region Transport Association announced a nationwide taxi strike to take effect from Monday June 30 through Thursday July 3. One spokesperson advised residents of Maseru to stay at home for the duration of the strike "for the sake of peace and their safety." The Transport Association claims the loyalty of 42 of Lesotho's 50 taxi associations. While the primary complaints of the Transport Association centered on the introduction several months ago of government-run buses (reftels), grievances aired at the June 24 press event ranged from discontent over GOL policies towards the news media to frustrations with alleged Chinese domination of Lesotho's retail sector.

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Comments from the Podium  
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¶3. The Maseru Region Transport Association's Public Affairs Officer, Lebohang Moea, stated that the transport sector would "not remain quiet, like other (aggrieved) sectors." Accusing the GOL of meddling in private business and not consulting with the population on matters of public interest, Moea intimated that the Taxi Association would not be responsible for the actions of taxi operators, frustrated by competition from GOL buses and rising fuel prices, during the strike. Mokete Jonase, Chairman of the Transport Association, asserted that no private taxi or buses would operate nationwide in Lesotho on June 30, accusing Minister of Home Affairs and Public Safety Lesao Lehohla (who also serves as Deputy Prime Minister) of "lying" to the transport operators about giving serious consideration to their grievances. (Note: The Transport Association called off a similar strike planned for June 1 in anticipation of negotiations with the GOL. End Note.)

¶4. Malitlou Morojele, Chairperson of the Maseru Chamber of Commerce and Industry, stated that her organization supports the Transport Association and that its members would close retail

businesses for the duration of the four-day strike. Stressing that the "government has no business in business," she said that the assignment of police units to protect GOL buses had the effect of keeping police officers from preventing crime in the capital city. Bokang Musa, the Transport Association's General Secretary, accused Lesotho's police and security organs of making threatening calls to association leaders. He concluded the event saying that "sometimes people must go through hardship" in order to "make things right for everybody."

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A Shrill, Threatening Affair  
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15. COMMENT: The tenor of the press conference was shrill, and the Maseru Region Transport Association currently appears committed to implement the strike. Past strikes (known as "stay-aways" in Lesotho) have frequently been disruptive to commerce and public transportation and often associated with sporadic violence. Association leaders made no effort to disassociate their proposed mass action from potential violence or disruption to the local economy. The GOL-which ironically implemented the bus system that has drawn the ire of taxi operators in order to mitigate disruption to public transportation during previous strikes-has thus far made no comment in response to the strike announcement. END COMMENT.

MURPHY